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"ALL MEXICO ON A WALL"

Diego Rivera's Murals at the Ministry of Public Education

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There are two families of artists: those who define themselves by their negations and exclusions and those who aspire to integrate different manners and styles in their work. Diego belongs to the second. . . . In the strict domain of painting, he was not a revolutionary or an innovator: he was an assimilator and an adapter. Like Poussin's, his eclecticism was a search for a complete art that would include many tendencies.

—OCTAVIO PAZ¹

To begin, we place two iconic frescoes by Diego Rivera side by side. *The Liberation of the Peon* (1923) (figure 3.1) represents Rivera the popular-nationalist, the Homer of Mexico's violent revolution and the odyssey of her Indian and peasant populations. *The Distribution of Arms* (1928) (figure 3.2) reveals Rivera the Marxist propagandist agitating for the worldwide historical proletarian revolution to come. The former opens onto a vista of the Mesa Central. In the foreground four revolutionary soldiers release a degraded, dark-skinned peon, while a hacienda smolders in the distance. The latter counters the naturalism and agrarian theme of this view with a scene of urban unrest relayed through a dense composition of overlapping forms. A communist worker rallies his peers to join a phalanx of campesinos riding into town. Along the proscenium a young Frida Kahlo passes out weapons, Tina Modotti disperses ammunition, and David Alfaro Siqueiros joins the rank and file in working-class solidarity.

Both panels derive from the vast cycle that Rivera executed at the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) between 1923 and 1928. The differences in style and ideological emphasis testify to Rivera's development as a mural artist over the five years he worked on the commission. During that period he mastered the fresco technique, elaborated a narrative approach to architectural space, and developed an often-emulated visual language that has become for many synonymous with the Mexican mural renaissance. For several scholars, the changes evident in this juxtaposition signal the artist's formal and

political maturation from an Italianate neo-primitivist to an engaged social realist, from a humanizing positivist toward a more radical materialist.² For others, these vagaries reveal Rivera's strategic self-promotion and capitulation to the ideological pretensions of his state patrons, an increasingly corrupt political regime that cloaked itself in the rhetoric of popular socialism.³ These explanations, however, obscure Rivera's sophisticated sense of style as an index of politics and history.

When analyzing this transitional work from the standpoint of the present, we should not lose sight of the political and economic vulnerability of the new regime; the social devastation and lack of civil society left in the wake of the Revolution; and the desire of politicians, artists, and intellectuals to raise the profile and increase the esteem and power of Mexico in a racist and economically imperialist international order. In retrospect, there is a clear shift from 1923 to 1928, from Obregón's charismatic caudillismo to Calles' corporate party system, from Vasconcelos' laissez-faire approach to content to an emerging social-realist orthodoxy that privileged Rivera and his followers. The visual and ideological power of Rivera's SEP cycle would play an important role in this transformation.

This essay analyzes the artist's aesthetic program across the cycle as a whole. Following Paz's insight, it argues that the different "manners" and "styles" evident in the SEP murals reveal an intentional integration of "multiple tendencies" in the service of a "complete art" that could encompass the complexity of Mexico's history, geography, and people or, as Bertram Wolfe would claim, put "all Mexico on a wall."⁴ In the different visual strategies Rivera employs, we can appreciate both the scope and logic of this project. As he painted at the SEP, certainly he matured as a fresco artist and his personal style evolved. But his stylistic changes were also calibrated to appeal to the administrators and politicians in the post-Revolutionary state and thereby to win a permanent place for mural art in its cultural programs. Likewise, by combining different formal languages, he strove to communicate a vision of the nation that was able to reflect its highly stratified social classes.

The great accomplishment of Rivera's SEP cycle was his successful visualization of the ideals put forth by the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors in its 1923 *Manifesto*: to create an ideologically focused art, rooted in "indigenous traditions," that reflected the struggles of peasant, worker, and soldier in Mexico's "transition from an old order to a new one."⁵ In so doing, Rivera also offered the political regime the appearance of being a "revolutionary" state responsive to the demands of a mobilized peasantry as well as the growing power of a small but vocal confederation of communist and socialist labor organizations. In the cycle, Rivera depicts a cross-class alliance unified by its common origins in an indigenized popular culture. Thus his SEP frescoes offered a vision of national unity at a moment when the state was at war with the Cristeros and when most elites viewed Mexico's fractured popular classes as, at best, a drag on national development—and, at worst, a guerrilla force ever ready to renew armed conflict.

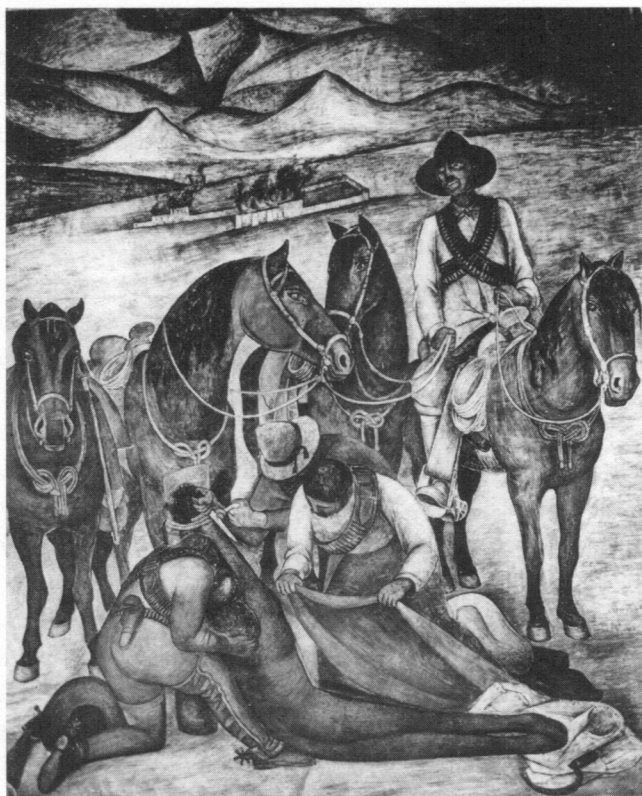


FIGURE 3.1

Diego Rivera. *The Liberation of the Peon*, fresco, first floor, south wall, Court of Labor, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (1923).

© 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk



FIGURE 3.1

Diego Rivera. *The Liberation of the Peon*, fresco, first floor, south wall, Court of Labor, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (1923).

© 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk

To be sure, Rivera's SEP cycle offers his own highly ideological take on the Revolution, agrarian reform, and socialist politics. The artist acknowledged as much when he declared in his 1960 autobiography that in the SEP murals he sought to "reflect the social life of Mexico as I saw it, and through my vision of the truth to show the masses the outline of the future."⁶ What follows is a close reading of Rivera's "vision of the truth" that pays particular attention to his stylistically encoded storytelling. This reading takes a discursive approach that does not presume that the mural corresponds with "reality." Rather, I treat mural art as a productive material practice that endeavored to shape the real toward specific ideological ends.⁷

Although Rivera pursued "eclecticism" in the name of Mexico's popular classes, his mural spoke more directly to the urban elite. Rivera's working- and middle-class public would not have perceived or understood his aesthetic synthesis. The peasants



FIGURE 3.2

Diego Rivera. *The Distribution of Arms*, fresco, third floor, south wall, Court of Fiestas, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (1928). © 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk

for whom he claimed to paint would have had virtually no access to his frescoes, and the record of public reception suggests that his actual audience was made up of bureaucrats and members of the bourgeoisie. Bureaucrats viewed his art as potentially useful propaganda; the bourgeoisie saw it as incoherent and incendiary. Only a small circle of leftist intellectuals seems to have understood the stylistic gambit Rivera used while he was working at the SEP. When he completed the cycle, however, the political utility of his integration of Giotto's Christian humanism, modernist experimentation with space and form, and agitprop didactics became evident and Rivera became a de-facto "state artist."

A paradox of Rivera's accomplishment is that his "vision of the truth" succeeded so well that it continues to determine public memory of the events and peoples depicted in it. As Francisco Reyes Palma notes, with sanguine admiration, mural art responded



FIGURE 3.2

Diego Rivera. *The Distribution of Arms*, fresco, third floor, south wall, Court of Fiestas, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (1928). © 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk

to the chaos of the Revolution by effecting a “radical change at the core of the social imaginary” and a “founding order, even at the expense of historical accuracy.”⁸ What was that “founding order”? How did Rivera’s formal and conceptual choices respond to and negotiate the demands of his patrons, the political and social chaos of post-Revolutionary Mexico, his own artistic ambition, and his desire (and that of his peers) to promote the cause of mural art as a tool for social engagement and change?

In 1923, José Vasconcelos contracted a team of artists to decorate the walls of the new SEP headquarters. The building’s three stories enclose two large interior patios with arched passageways that afford nearly 17,000 square feet of wall surface.⁹ Initially in the collective spirit of the recently drafted Syndicate Manifesto, Rivera worked with a team that included fellow artists Xavier Guerrero, Jean Charlot, Amado de la Cueva, and the mason Luis Escobar. Within five months, however, Rivera demoted his peers and claimed the project for himself.¹⁰ With the exception of four frescoes on the first floor and the state emblems on the second, the 124 panels of the cycle were conceived, designed, and painted by Rivera.

In the architecturally challenging corridors Rivera painted an epic narrative that unfolds for visitors as they move through the space. On these walls Rivera presents Mexico’s recent revolution as prologue to a proletarian one to come. He visualizes this “progressive” tale in an iconography of Mexican geography and popular tradition that moves from the rural countryside to the city, from exploitation to liberation, from Zapatismo to the death of the capitalist system. Style, too, mobilizes the narrative, as Rivera shifts from pictorial naturalism to social realism, informed by the lessons of Cubism. These deliberate stylistic shifts offer the key to interpreting Rivera’s political message across the cycle.

The artist signaled his encyclopedic intentions from the outset. At the SEP’s inauguration in 1923, Vasconcelos described the projected cycle as “Concerning the decoration of the corridor walls, our great artist, Diego Rivera . . . plans a frieze ascending along the staircase. Its subject matter starts with the sea level, and its tropical vegetation melts into the landscape of our high plateau and culminates with the volcanoes.”¹¹ Over the next five years Rivera moved away from the humanist allegory seen in his first mural commission (*Creation*, 1923, at the National Preparatory School) and developed a more complex dialectical approach to historical narrative and the use of space. This development was nascent in the project Vasconcelos describes, and the stairwell images, with their evolutionary structure, relay in microcosm the themes of the larger cycle.

THE COURT OF LABOR

The murals in the first courtyard depict peasant and artisanal labor in rich earth tones on the first floor. The second floor is decorated with esoteric symbols related to professional work, painted in grisaille. The third floor includes portraits of martyrs, allegories

and a scene depicting fraternity between worker and peasant. The three floors, taken together, suggest a hierarchy that replicates the one in *Creation*. At the National Preparatory School, Rivera allegorized spiritual evolution through education in a single image: a nude man and woman seated along the mural's base gaze up toward idealized figures who represent theological and cardinal virtues linking the humans to the symbols of divine knowledge represented at the top of the composition.

In the hierarchy Rivera set up at the SEP, images of peasant and working-class labor, depicted on the first floor, establish the foundation of the new social order. This floor supports a second, decorated with emblems of professional work, implying that intellectual labor is undergirded by the physical labor of the popular classes. The third-floor images emphasize political ideals. Painted on the top floor and at the apex of a hierarchy of labor, these ideals espouse the virtues of work, social equality, and secularized Christian confraternity. As one moves up the floors, Rivera's imagery argues that the social ideals guiding the formation of a new more equitable society originate in the humble work of everyday people rather than in the endeavors of the educated alone.

Rivera divided the three sides of the first-floor courtyard into regions: the tropical South (north wall), central plateau (south wall), and mineral rich North (east wall). He mixes images of traditional hand labor and industrialized work. In one scene, a campesino holds sugarcane while conversing with Tehuanas—women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec renowned for their beauty and traditional style of dress—in the lush landscape of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. In another, the factory workers process the cane into sugar. Workers stretch in unison to stir vats of sugar or bend to pour the liquid into molds. The theme of the first-floor murals is the virtue of hard work. The exploitation and liberation of the worker are likewise depicted, however. With these scenes the political ideology of the cycle comes into focus.

In a sequence of powerful images, peasants enter and exit claustrophobic mines while their employers fleece them. Campesinos lug bags of grain that they have harvested to be weighed as the domineering hacendado and his accountant watch. Here, Rivera demonstrates what he had learned from the Renaissance frescoes in southern Italy and Giotto's Arena Chapel cycle (1305–6). In both composition and style, Rivera's *Entry into the Mines* (1923) recalls Giotto's *Christ on the Road to Calvary*; *Leaving the Mines* (1923) invokes his *Crucifixion*; and *The Liberation of the Peon* (figure 3.1) evokes Giotto's *Lamentation*. But Rivera secularizes Giotto's subject matter to craft peasants as Christ-like martyrs, attempting, like Giotto, to use a vernacular style to communicate with a Catholic public. At the Arena Chapel, the Church liberates humanity; in Rivera's cycle, the Revolution brings salvation.

By emphasizing the brutalities perpetrated against miners and agrarian workers, Rivera refers obliquely to the uprising at the Cananea Copper Mines (1906) that helped to mobilize Pancho Villa's Northern Division and the struggle for agrarian reform in central Mexico led by Emiliano Zapata. The followers of Villa and Zapata, unlike Venus-

tiano Carranza's Constitutionalist army, were from the peasant and working classes. They fought against the vestiges of colonial feudalism and the abusive practices of foreign-owned industries operating along the nation's northern border. Rivera obscures the factionalism of the Revolution, however, sidelining Villa as well as the Constitutionalist cause in favor of Zapatismo and its call for "land and liberty." In Zapata's agitation for communal land reapportionment, Rivera found an equivalent for the socialist redistribution of wealth. Likewise, as Mari Carmen Ramírez argues, Rivera, in privileging Zapatismo, reflected the desire of the "Sonoran Dynasty" (the generals who dominated the post-Revolutionary state) to exploit Zapata's "hero cult" to gain the support of a recalcitrant peasantry that the fledgling government desperately needed.¹²

In the Court of Labor, the people are depicted as one with the land. The most idealized landscapes are located in the South, where the mural locates Mexico's racial and cultural authenticity in the legendary beauty of the Tehuana. Depicted as emblems of natural bounty, Rivera's Tehuanas represent the national body—a feminized, indigenous body—that would give birth, both literally and symbolically, to a new mestizo nation—one that is racially and culturally mixed. In this way, he included women in the new society as the reproducers of race and culture. As Adriana Zavala demonstrates, however, the tendency of post-Revolutionary artists to feminize Indian culture only reinscribed a Creole patriarchal authority that endorsed *mestizaje* (the blending of Spanish and Indian "blood" and culture) on its own terms.¹³

Images of the Tehuana abound in post-Revolutionary art. Artists represented the culture of Tehuantepec as matriarchal and as an autochthonous form of socialism. The Tehuana's distinctive costume, understood as a pre-modern style of dress, was praised for its purported authenticity and endurance. Miguel Covarrubias, in his book *Mexico South*, makes the investment of intellectuals in the Tehuana costume clear: "Economic differences [among the Tehuanas] do not mean much," but "there is an aristocracy of citified girls who bob their hair and wear shoes, stockings, and tight fitting modern dresses, unbecoming in comparison with the stately, elegant, and colorful native costume."¹⁴ In the difference between the Isthmus women in "colorful native costume" and their "citified" sisters who dressed in the latest international fashions, Covarrubias found a metaphor for the nation's struggle for political autonomy and cultural authenticity in the onslaught of foreign influence and capital.

In works like Cobarrubias', the Tehuana was an emblem of "Mexico South"; this native costume was linked through a chain of culture and resistance to the radical socialism of the Yucatan and subaltern Mexico—what would later be dubbed "deep Mexico."¹⁵ The Tehuana, in Rivera's SEP murals, authenticates and anchors his vision of popular and proletarian revolution in "deep" Mexico. Thus, his cycle belongs to the broader intellectual project to use the Tehuana's supposed beauty and strength to resuscitate Indian culture in the eyes of urban elites. With the "comely" Tehuana offsetting the specter of armed peasants in his murals, Rivera presented a reassuring image of Mexico's indigenous peoples.

COURT OF FIESTAS

In the second courtyard, Rivera's linking of popular or "deep" Mexico, the agrarian revolution, and contemporary socialism is more explicit. In the Court of Fiestas, he equated three social sectors—the rural peasantry, the urban working class, and an amorphously defined popular class—that did not necessarily seek common cause. As labor in the murals gives way to fiestas, a brighter palette replaces earth tones. In the Court of Fiestas, the open vistas and Giotto-inspired compositions of the Court of Labor disappear as Rivera's frescoes become denser and more clearly modernist. Like the first courtyard, the second has images dispersed across three of the four sides of the building on all three floors. On the first floor, Rivera depicts scenes of popular rituals along with three large sequences painted between 1923 and 1924: *Distribution of the Land* (plate 2) (south wall), *May Day* (figure 3.3) (west wall), and *The Market/Tianguis* (figure 3.4) (north wall). On the second floor, Jean Charlot, Xavier Guerrero, and Amado de la Cueva painted renderings in grisaille of state emblems. On the third floor, Rivera illustrates revolutionary and proletarian *corridos* (songs).

As with the Court of Labors, the progression from first to third floor represents a hierarchy. In the Court of Fiestas, Rivera argues that the political organization and revolution originate in the spirit of resistance that can be discerned in Mexico's popular celebrations. This is why the rituals associated with the Day of the Dead are given such prominence. Like the Tehuana, the Day of the Dead festival is unique to Mexico. Its features, such as graveside altars, macabre sugar skulls, and the spirit of "laughing at death" reveal a complex syncretism that blends Mesoamerican and Spanish Catholic ritual.

On the first floor, Rivera devotes many panels to the rituals associated with the Day of the Dead, from the explosion of papier-mâché Judas figures to graveside offerings at family plots to the festive boating parties at Xochimilco. Interspersed among these panels are depictions of traditional dances such as the Yaqui Deer Dance and the Zandunga. Although Rivera focuses on distinct culture groups and the popular classes in the panels dedicated to traditional celebrations, he also emphasizes social unity regardless of status. The cultural rituals that bond Mexicans, he suggests, transcend ethnic and class differences. For example, in *Santa Anita* (1923–24) a "citified girl" with bobbed blond hair, "tight fitting modern dress," and heavy makeup stands among more "elegant" and "stately" Indian beauties to purchase poppies for the Festival of Flowers. While this Mexican flapper would irk Covarrubias, Rivera presents her as a legitimate Mexican, even if artificiality makes her less comely than the women at her side. Rivera peoples his crowd scenes with dandies, bureaucrats, *charros* (Mexican cowboys), prostitutes, and workers purchasing fruit waters, tamales, and sugar skulls from vendors in Mexico's colorful urban markets.

These frescoes locate us in the street and among the "people." In them Rivera brings the boisterous world outside Vasconcelos' SEP indoors and affirms it as a source of social

progress and historical change. In the three large sequences that anchor the walls of the first-floor cycle, he shows alliances across classes. With *Distribution of the Land*, *May Day*, and *The Market/Tianguis*, Rivera asserts parity between the organic social democracy of everyday co-mingling in the street with more formal mechanisms of social equality: Zapata's agrarian reform and the Communist Party. As Ramírez notes, these three large sequences mark a temporal shift in Rivera's cycle from an allegorical past to the historical present and a prophetic future. Likewise, they signal an aesthetic shift from "the synthetic, symbolic language of the Court of Labor to a form of illustration based on narrative" that would come to the fore in his execution of the third-floor *corridos*.¹⁶ Thus, in these three sequences, style becomes important to Rivera's attempts to overcome ideological differences between Zapata's agrarianism and the state-endorsed Communist Party. His visual strategies link those two elements to the popular market as expressions of a "deep" Mexico still discernible in the vibrant folkways of the people.

Distribution of the Land (1923–24) (see plate 2) stretches across three panels linked by Rivera's incorporation of the doorframes into the illusionism of the depicted space. A crowd of white-clad peasants gathers in the open air to witness the partial restitution of their communal lands, or *ejidos*. In the central panel, Rivera shows pueblo elders lodging their land claims. Two bureaucrats examine their request as another holds a map of local estates and a third gestures toward the landscape beyond the crowd. By dedicating a large amount of wall space to this topic, Rivera situates agrarian reform, and thus Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, as the major accomplishment of the Mexican Revolution. And by including a posthumous portrait of Zapata, Rivera implies that his proposal, articulated in the *Plan de Ayala* (November 25, 1911), was actualized by the post-Revolutionary Constitution. In this instance, Rivera takes liberty with the facts and deliberately obscures the betrayal of Zapata, crafting the Revolution as an essentially socialist struggle. *Distribution of the Land* thus constitutes the peasant equivalent of *May Day*, where the workers' rights guaranteed by Article 123 establish the precondition of proletarian organization that in turn will bring the revolution to its logical conclusion.

May Day (1923–24) (figure 3.3) also spans three panels. Denim-clad workers gather before a congested industrial corridor on the left. To the right, a peasant-filled landscape reiterates the scene of gathered peasants in *Distribution of the Land*. In the central image, proletarian and peasant organizations unite to celebrate the workers' holiday. Over the doorframe two small boys, clad in the costumes of urban and rural labor, hold a red banner that proclaims: "True civilization will be harmony between men and the earth and among men." The crowd scenes are agitated: leaders raise their fists and deliver speeches while participants wave red flags emblazoned with communist and Zapatista slogans. This sequence equates the struggle for agrarian reform in Mexico (a metaphor for the Revolution) with the battle for workers' rights everywhere (the cause of the international communist organization the Third International). Whereas Rivera uses a flat, simplified naturalism in *Distribution of the Land*, here he pays homage to the agitprop style of socialist propaganda by incorporating signage and party slogans.

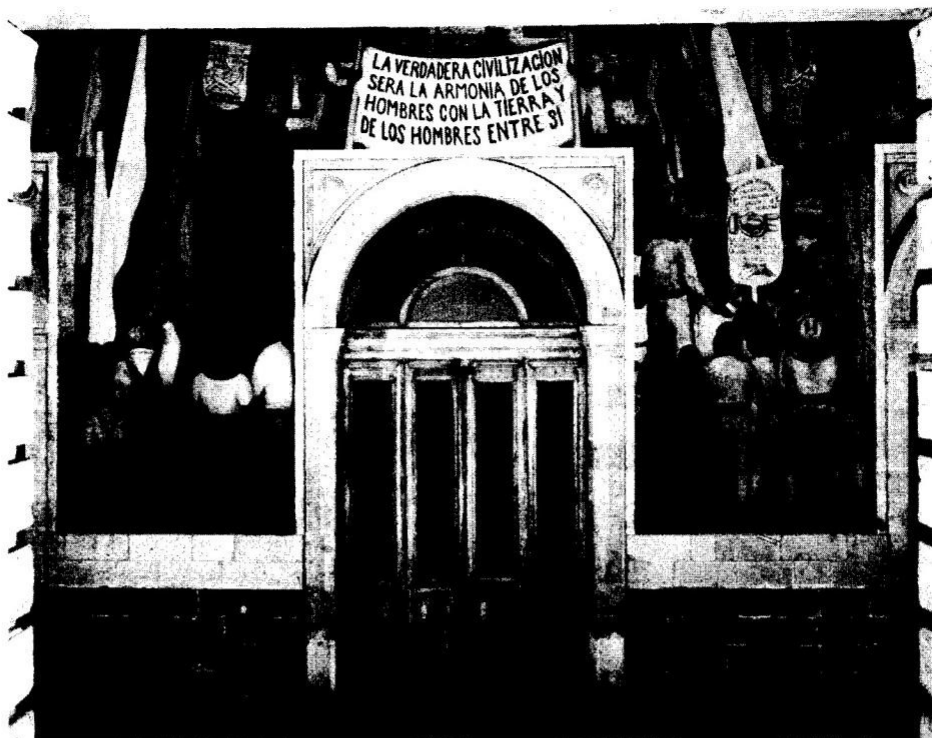


FIGURE 3.3

Diego Rivera. *May Day*, fresco, first floor, west wall, Court of Fiestas, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (1923–24). © 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk

Rather than depict an organized gathering of workers, in *The Market/Tianguis* (1923–24) (figure 3.4) Rivera chronicles a cross-section of Mexicans going about their business in the market. “*Tianguis*” (meaning “market”) derives from the Nahuatl language and refers to the covered outdoor markets that have been a staple of Mexican life since before the Conquest. Like the Tehuana costume, the market is a surviving indigenous folkway and therefore represents the ongoing presence of “deep” Mexico in the nation’s modern capital. In these scenes, Rivera’s mastery of cubist devices comes to the fore. Rivera stacks repeated flat forms to give a sense of shallow space. For example, he duplicates wide round sombreros throughout the middle of the composition. While Rivera suggests a horizon line along the top of the image, the perspective does not recede logically toward a single vanishing point in deep space. Rather, he presents the viewer with simultaneous points of view—much as Paul Cézanne does in his many still-life paintings. Along the base of the wall, standing figures face us directly. Instead of depicting the stretched canvas shades that cover vending kiosks as thin white lines in profile, which would correspond with the spatial logic of the figures, Rivera portrays them as



FIGURE 3.3
 Diego Rivera. *May Day*, fresco, first floor, west wall, Court of Fiestas, Ministry of Public Education,
 Mexico City (1923–24). © 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico,
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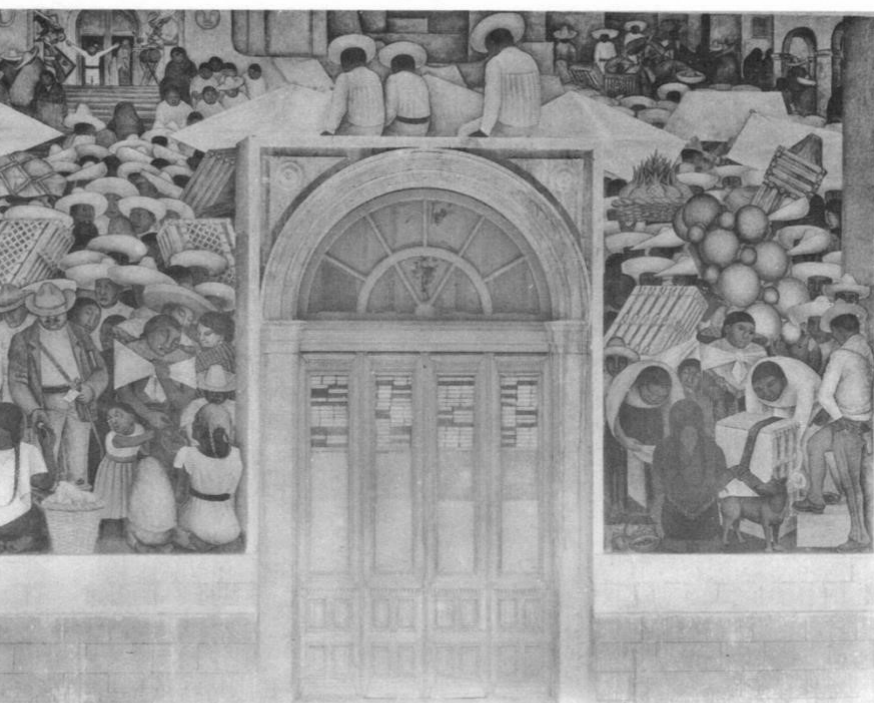


FIGURE 3.4

Diego Rivera. *The Market/Tianguis*, fresco, first floor, north wall, Court of Fiestas, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (1923–24). © 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk



FIGURE 3.4

Diego Rivera. *The Market/Tianguis*, fresco, first floor, north wall, Court of Fiestas, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (1923–24). © 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk

trapezoids seen from above in a bird's eye view that tilts up the composition, as Cézanne had tilted the tabletops in his canvases.

Rivera makes other references to the cubist analysis of pictorial space—for example, by slyly invoking Picasso's illusionistic use of chair-caning and wood comb in the cross-hatched wooden crates he distributes throughout the composition. The rounded gourds painted at the right in the central panel invoke the sphere; pineapples and steel funnels recall the cone; and the many boxes index the cube. This painted scene is no simplistic "window onto the world," but a witty demonstration of Rivera's facility with avant-garde techniques. The formal complexity of these scenes of social organization also gives them a political inflection. Whereas the images of rural and industrial labor in the first court humanize and sanctify Mexico's popular classes, the sophisticated social realism of images in the second court argues for an equally sophisticated political society.

In these three large sequences, Rivera asserts that socialism continues the Mexican Revolution, itself an organic expression of the egalitarian values of "deep" Mexico and its popular culture. This is the ideological argument of the mural cycle as a whole.

Rivera sacrifices historical accuracy and rationalizes Mexico's violent past by situating the Revolution in a progressive narrative in which he interprets popular values that, for him, prefigure a proletarian revolution yet to come. In the process he Mexicanizes working-class politics and lifts the demand for agrarian reform to international significance as part of the world-historical struggle against capitalism. All the while he argues that these demands issue from the deep values of the Mexican people, not from a foreign ideology.

In the third-floor murals, Rivera reinforces this connection between the agrarian struggle and a still-to-come proletarian revolution. Rivera illustrates Mexican revolutionary and international proletarian *corridos* in a visual loop that implies continuity between one political struggle and the other. The third-floor cycle begins with *The Distribution of Arms* (1928) (figure 3.2) and reiterates the solidarity between peasant and proletarian depicted in *May Day*. This image, however, is set in a prophetic future, signaled in the lyrics on the red ribbon that frames the vignette: "And so the proletarian revolution will be . . ." Subsequent scenes depict the suffering and resilience of an armed population fighting for their rights. There are views from the trenches and views that elaborate a post-combat social order in which the poor are fed, the ignorant educated, and the old social hierarchy overturned. Rifle-bearing peasants and hammer-and-sickle wielding workers harass and humiliate the elite.

Rivera uses an illusionistic archway to frame each scene of the third-floor suite and to establish a shallow sense of space. The painted arches conjure the trompe l'oeil techniques of cubist paintings as well as Giotto's rendering of the imitation marble veneer at the Arena Chapel. The faux architecture also supports the ribbon of text that directs viewers from one panel to the next as they follow the narrative around the corridor. Midway through the cycle, the proletarian song ends and a revolutionary *corrido* resumes. The lyrics of this song issue from the mouth of a peasant guitarist. Here, in one of many instances where Rivera quotes Mesoamerican imagery, he renders the song-ribbon in the guise of a Maya speech glyph. Through these references to both Western and non-Western visual techniques, Rivera associates his "social realism" with both European and ancient indigenous art.

The *corrido* panels bring together some of the styles Rivera employed in the three large sequences on the first floor: cubist devices, a simplified naturalism, and agitprop realism. This integration of competing formulations of mass culture and politics is precisely the "outline of the future" that Rivera sought to conjure with his "vision of the truth." For in these future-oriented vignettes, the social antagonisms generated by colonialism and years of armed conflict are slowly overcome as socialism unites different ethnic groups and classes into a nation capable of participating in an international industrial order vouchsafed by a world-historical proletarian revolution in which Mexico, by implication, takes the lead.

In some of Rivera's most humorous, dense, and visually economical images he juxtaposes scenes of capitalist society with prophetic scenes of Mexican socialism. For

example, in *Wall Street Banquet* (1926) a scene of American monopolists (J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Henry Ford) makes witty references to the fable of King Midas' golden touch.¹⁷ The safe, out of which gilded tickertape streams, resembles a mechanical ass with light bulbs for eyes and megaphones for ears. Financiers dine on champagne and stock receipts in the arid atmosphere of a bank vault. Rivera signals the social decay of US capitalism by distorting the physiognomy of these financiers and their consorts. Rivera contrasts their greed with images of socialist society.

In *Our Daily Bread* (1928) (figure 3.5), a dark-skinned communist worker presides over a humble meal of bread and fruit. The figures seated at the table represent the young and old, light and dark, working, popular, and middle classes, demonstrating the social unity of the new political order. Rivera situates their frugal repast in a productive landscape of factories and grain silos. A Tehuana bearing a woven basket of indigenous fruits stands behind the worker, marking the location as Mexican. Behind her, peasants, laborers, and soldiers gather as participants and guardians in the new social order.

Our Daily Bread is hieratically ordered in a shallow pictorial space that recedes as forms overlap along a vertical axis. The Tehuana's pose echoes the industrial architecture behind her. In this way Rivera recalls the frescoes from the first floor's Court of Labor and suggests that industrial modernity will be grounded in the "authentic" values and culture of "deep" Mexico, which she represents. In this world, social differences cease to matter because an egalitarian political order and a socially just economic system enable a hybrid society. Unlike Vasconcelos' spiritually directed racial eugenics, Rivera's vision of *mestizaje* is social, with culture as its medium. Just as the *tianguis* served as a model for the political organization of the Communist Party, the Tehuana is equated visually with industry, and her presence insists that "deep" Mexico will not be sacrificed to technological modernity. Like the Tehuana's costume, indigenous culture will persevere.

Bertram Wolfe, Rivera's biographer, used Rivera's SEP frescoes to illustrate *Portrait of Mexico* (1937), his socialist account of the country's post-Revolutionary transformation. Writer and artist worked closely together on this book, and Wolfe's description makes explicit the ideological argument encoded in Rivera's cycle. He writes, "Mexico is a land in transition: it is in the process of changing from pre-capitalist to capitalist, from handicraft to machinofacture, from local to national-international economy—from a conglomerate of folks and regions into a nation."¹⁸ Modernization, he concludes:

would involve aiding [Indians] to construct a written language, to preserve . . . what is *worthwhile* in their traditions and literature and dances and songs and decorative arts, and to lead to their *voluntary incorporation into a free union of peoples on the basis of a common national, and ultimately international, economy*, in which their immediate part in the national and world division of labor would flow from the climatic-telluric nature of their regions, the local fauna and flora, their special temperaments and aptitudes, and the application of the methods of modern science to the development of the possibilities latent in each of these factors [emphasis added].¹⁹

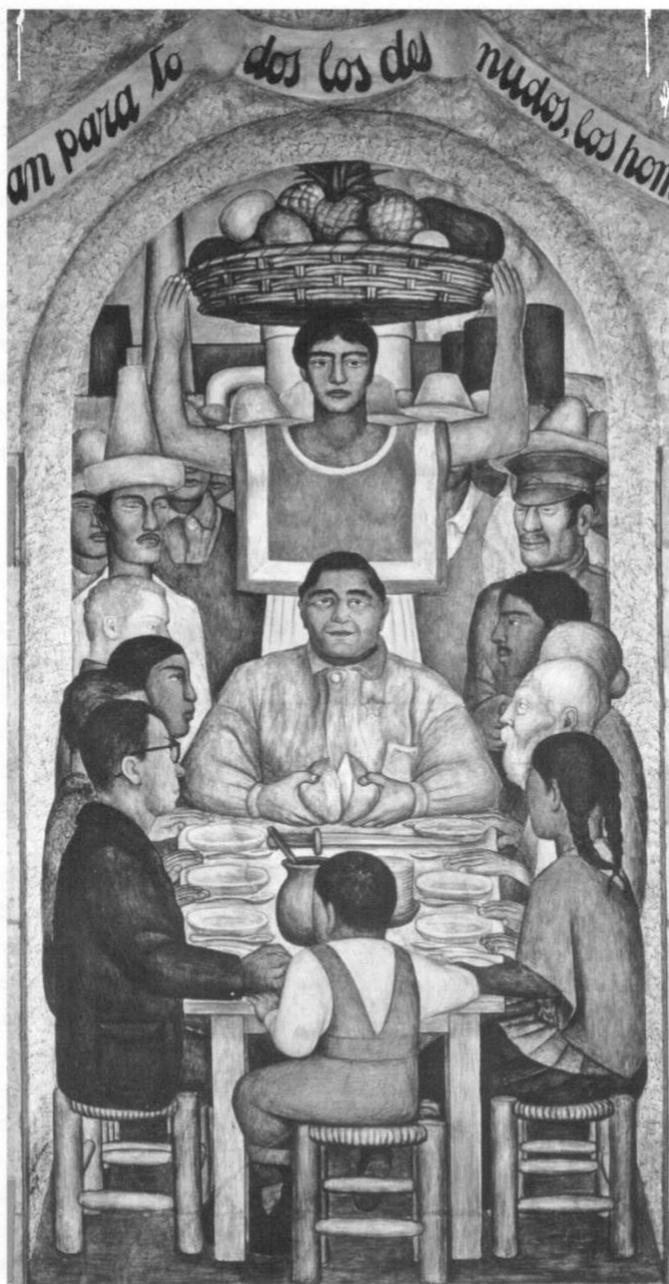


FIGURE 3.5

Diego Rivera. *Our Daily Bread*, fresco, third floor, west wall, Court of Fiestas, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (1928). © 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk

Wolfe's un-self-conscious paternalism toward Mexico's indigenous populations as well as his assumptions about the "natural" relationship among race, culture, and region typify the fundamentally assimilationist and modernizing rhetoric of the post-Revolutionary discourse on the "Indian problem." And Rivera's SEP murals represent one of the most powerful and cogent articulations of this period discourse.²⁰ Particularly significant in Wolfe's statement is the assertion that preserving "what is worthwhile" in Mexico's indigenous traditions and folk cultures will enable the country's smooth and inevitable transformation into a modern, industrialized nation-state. The ongoing (but highly circumscribed) presence of indigenized culture, he implies, will guarantee that Mexico stays "Mexican" despite the political-economic changes on the horizon. While this argument is implicit throughout the cycle, in the stairwell sequence it becomes explicit. In these murals Rivera weaves the "climatic-telluric nature" of Mexico's regions and people into a narrative of socio-political development. And his use of style to encode ideology is paramount in that accomplishment.

THE STAIRWELL CYCLE

The stairwell cycle unwinds from the first to the third floors. Visitors ascending the stairs replicate the movement upward in the mural from sea level through tropical vegetation and then the high plateau, and finally the volcanoes.²¹ These landscapes, in turn, narrate the history of the country from a mythical past through episodes of exploitation and revolution to the building of a modern and egalitarian society. Thus the ascent is a journey of social and political evolution. Although described as early as 1923, the stairwell was painted in 1928.

On the first floor Rivera depicts the coastal waters, with nymphs, a scuba diver, and a tugboat. The watery milieu, anthropomorphized clouds, and seminude women call to mind Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (ca. 1482), thereby reinforcing viewers' sense of witnessing an ancient and divine origin. As we move up the stairs, *Tehuantepec Landscape* comes into view. Nubile beauties cavort and lie languidly amidst flowering trees and *palapas* (thatched roof huts). The iconography and style recalls such post-impressionist bathing scenes as Henri Matisse's Fauvist works or Paul Gauguin's South Pacific idylls. Like the remote worlds those artists conjured, the *Isthmus of Tehuantepec* represents a pre-lapsarian world before Conquest. Next, the visitor confronts *Xochipili*, the Aztec goddess of flowers and spring shown seated in ecstasy within a jungle and surrounded by mysterious figures. The scene evokes *The Dream* (1910) by the Douanier Rousseau and the figures recall both Rivera's use of allegory in *Creation* and the symbolist penchant for Gnosticism.²² They also speak to Rivera's attempts to represent a utopian pre-Conquest world that has been lost but can nonetheless be re-created through progressive social change. Shown participating in a sacred ritual, these figures hold the esoteric secrets of Mexico's indigenous past.

Farther up the stairs, the paradise of indigenous Mexico is lost to feudal land ten-

ancy in *The Hacienda* (plantation). Peasants labor while their lazy boss naps; his posture echoes the languid figures in *Tehuantepec Landscape*, emphasizing the original inhabitants' dispossession and marking the beginnings of capitalism. Whereas once people coexisted in harmony on communal lands, now they are indentured workers in a system of private ownership. The sugar hacienda depicted in this scene suggests its location in the agricultural zone that encompasses the state of Morelos, the birthplace of Zapatismo. Just as he had sanctified peasants in the Court of Labor by referring to Giotto's figures at the Arena Chapel, Rivera uses an Italianate naturalism in this part of the stairwell to humanize the plight of peasants subjected to the abuses of a corrupt owner class. But in a dark grove, a campesino patiently sharpens a machete, auguring peasant revolt.

In *The Burial*, Rivera renders the interment of a slain peon at dusk as figures gather around an open grave. The scene, located in the arid high plateau, recalls Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1849) as well as Giotto's *Lamentation*. As a secular entombment, the fresco elevates the death of revolutionaries to martyrdom and prepares viewers for the social rebirth depicted in the scenes that follow.

The final sequence begins with *The Mechanization of the Countryside* (figure 3.6). Rivera reintroduces the golden hues from the Court of Labor in a utopian image of Mexico's industrialization. At the lower left, a priest, a federal soldier, and a capitalist are struck down by an allegorical figure of the proletariat wielding a red thunderbolt. At the upper right, a worker, a peasant, and a revolutionary soldier stand in unity. The image is anchored by a kneeling indigenous woman, who holds an ear of corn in each hand. She is modeled on statues of the Aztec fertility goddess Xilonen. Behind her we see a dam, airplanes, a railroad, and electrical wires. Here, as in panels such as *Our Daily Bread*, Rivera argues that the countryside will be mechanized according to the values and cultural legacies of "deep" Mexico.

The Teacher details the technologically advanced and egalitarian future that socialist organization promises. A young woman educates students before a functionalist building under construction. At left, a worker, a soldier, and a peasant have traded their arms for the surveyor's tape and the engineer's compass. To the right, researchers proffer medicine to a mother and her child. While the teacher brings Vasconcelos' educational mission to the rural countryside, men consult blueprints and erect a grade school, a reference to one of the SEP's premier architectural projects.

The cycle culminates with Rivera's self-portrait as an architect gazing at blueprints while a mason and an assistant prepare the wall for fresco. Rivera, by representing the three components of mural labor—design, masonry, and painting—in this final image, endorses the collaborative working-class values of the Syndicate's Manifesto—an ironic gesture, given Rivera's monopoly of this commission. And by invoking the Renaissance concept of the true artist as one equally adept at painting, architecture, and sculpture, Rivera claims to be a modern Michelangelo. Like the Italian artists who enabled the rebirth of humanism, Rivera and his cohort are pictured as midwives to the nascent



FIGURE 3.6

Diego Rivera. *The Mechanization of the Countryside*, fresco, third floor, west wall, stairwell, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (1926). © 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk

socialist culture of “deep” Mexico. By placing artistic labor at the top of the stairwell’s evolutionary walk, moreover, Rivera argues that mural art should play a central role in Mexico’s post-Revolutionary transformation.

Rivera’s stairwell explains the process that will tie the activities depicted in the Court of Labor to those described in the Court of Fiestas. It also demonstrates the stylistic steps that lead the viewer from the naturalistic scene in *The Liberation of the Peon* to the dense cubist one in *The Distribution of Arms*. This frieze surveys Mexico’s many regions and telescopes its complex political history into stylistically coded scenes that demonstrate the artist’s wide knowledge of Western art and his commitment to a modern industrialized, but socialist, future. For Jean Charlot, Rivera’s integration of the painterly values of the School of Paris into his social realist style betrays a bohemian youth spent among the European avant-garde. Rivera’s effort to reconcile certain elements of avant-garde plastic experimentation with the social mandate of a public art was not merely evidence of a bohemian’s first serious political engagement. It also signals his innovative attempt to activate the avant-garde’s belief in the political significance of formal experimentation for the purposes of a public, rather than a private, art.



FIGURE 3.6
Diego Rivera. *The Mechanization of the Countryside*, fresco, third floor, west wall, stairwell, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (1926). © 2010 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS). Photograph: Bob Schalkwijk

During his years at the SEP Rivera aligned himself with the Communist Party and with a dialectical materialist view of history and social change. He worked to invent a visual language that could correspond with the different social groups whose unification could lead to a socialist revolution in Mexico—a mostly illiterate country with a colonial legacy, deep racial inequality, and a working “class” that was more peasant than proletarian. By incorporating “multiple tendencies” and slyly nodding to the utopian politics of avant-garde experimentation, he tried to offer the public a “complete art,” that constructed “all Mexico” according to his unique insight as a utopian visionary. The SEP murals remain crucial to analyses of Rivera’s art, and of Mexican muralism more broadly, because their aesthetic, political, and ethical eclecticism demonstrate the complexities and contradictions of putting “all Mexico on a wall.”

NOTES

1. Octavio Paz, “Re/Visions: Mural Painting,” *Essays on Mexican Art*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1987), p. 124.
2. Jean Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance 1920–1925* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1979), pp. 269–79; and Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), pp. 167–81.
3. Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940: The Art of a New Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 13–26 and pp. 75–85; and Mari Carmen Ramírez, “The Ideology and Politics of the Mexican Mural Movement: 1920–1925” (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1989), pp. 247–65, 344–54, 396–400.
4. “All Mexico Is on a Wall” is Bertram Wolfe’s title for his chapter on Rivera’s SEP murals in *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, pp. 167–81.
5. David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, Xavier Guerrero, Fermín Revueltas, José Clement Orozco, Ramón Alva Guadarrama, Germán Cueto, and Carlos Mérida, “Manifesto of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors,” *El Machete* (1923) translated and republished in Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea, *Inverted Utopias: Avant Garde Art in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 461.
6. Diego Rivera and Gladys March, *My Life, My Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1960), p. 79.
7. For a discussion of the difference between realist and discursive approaches to representation, see Mary K. Coffey, “What Puts the Culture in Multiculturalism? An Analysis of Culture, Government, and Mexican Identity,” in *Multicultural Curriculum*, eds. Cameron McCarthy and Ram Mahalingam (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 37–41.
8. Francisco Reyes Palma, “Mural Devices,” in *José Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927–1934*, eds. Renato González Mello and Diane Miliotes (Hanover: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College; New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), p. 220.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
10. Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance*, pp. 269–79.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
12. Ramírez, *The Ideology and Politics of the Mexican Mural Movement*, p. 256.

13. Adriana Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition: Women, Gender and Representation in Mexican Art and Culture* (College Park: Penn State University Press, in press).
14. Miguel Covarrubias, *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), pp. 252–53.
15. “Deep Mexico” is Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla’s term and is therefore anachronistic for the period. However, it signifies an intellectual investment in Mexico’s indigenous origins as the source of national originality and post-colonial politics. While the term and its attendant assumptions about indigeneity and authenticity have been critiqued, I use it throughout this chapter to signal the intellectual discourse on authenticity generated by post-Revolutionary Indigenismo. Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla, *México profundo* (Mexico: SEP, 1987).
16. Ramírez, *The Ideology and Politics of the Mexican Mural Movement*, p. 345.
17. Diana Briuolo Destéfano, “Aproximaciones al Corrido de la Revolución de Diego Rivera en la Secretaría de Educación Pública,” unpublished paper presented at the Reunión Internacional Re-Visión del muralismo del siglo XX (décadas 20–40): México-Estados Unidos, E. Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, UNAM, Mexico City, August 21–23, 2000.
18. Bertram Wolfe and Diego Rivera, *Portrait of Mexico* (New York: Covici, Friede Publishers, 1937), p. 22.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
20. See Mary K. Coffey, “The ‘Mexican Problem’: Nation and ‘Native’ in Mexican Muralism and Cultural Discourse,” in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, eds. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Wineberg (College Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), pp. 43–70.
21. Charlot, *Mexican Mural Renaissance*, p. 254.
22. Renato Gonzalez Mello, “Manuel Gamio, Diego Rivera and the Politics of Mexican Anthropology,” *RES* 45 (Spring 2004):161–85.